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Programme of activities of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People

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Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 52/108 of 12 December 1997, the General Assembly decided to appoint the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as coordinator for the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004), and, in subsequent resolutions, requested the United Nations High Commissioner to submit, through the Secretary-General, an annual report on the implementation of the programme of activities for the Decade. The Commission on Human Rights in its resolution 1999/51 of 27 April 1999, requested the High Commissioner to submit to the General Assembly, at its fifty-fourth session, a mid-term report reviewing the implementation of the programme of activities for the Decade, including identification of obstacles to the achievement of the goals of the Decade and recommendations for solutions to overcome those obstacles. The High Commissioner was requested to take into account the views of Member States, the specialized agencies, organizations of indigenous people and other interested bodies in the preparation of such a report.

2. The present report provides information about the activities of the United Nations system, including the specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations, relating to indigenous peoples. Insufficient information was received from Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and indigenous organizations for inclusion in the present report.

Background: the objectives of the International Decade

3. The General Assembly, by its resolution 48/163 of 21 December 1993, proclaimed the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People. The goal of the Decade is to strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as human rights, culture, the environment, development, education and health. The theme of the Decade is "Indigenous people: partnership in action".

4. In its resolution 50/157 of 21 December 1995, the General Assembly adopted the programme of activities for the Decade, contained in the annex to that resolution. In addition to the overall goal of the Decade, the General Assembly identified a number of specific general objectives, in particular: (a) the development of activities benefiting indigenous peoples by the specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other intergovernmental and national agencies; (b) the education of indigenous and non-indigenous societies concerning the situation, cultures, languages, rights and aspirations of indigenous peoples; (c) the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous people; (d) the implementation of the recommendations pertaining to indigenous people of all high-level international conferences, including the proposal to establish a permanent forum for indigenous people in the United Nations system; (e) the adoption of the draft United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples and the further development of international standards as well as national legislation for the protection and promotion of the human rights of indigenous people. The General Assembly proposed that the Decade should be assessed by quantifiable outcomes that improve the lives of indigenous people and that an evaluation be made halfway through the Decade and at its end.

5. The programme of activities contained in the annex to resolution 50/157 contains a list of proposals or activities that should be undertaken by the major actors, of which 38 concern intergovernmental organizations, and underlined the importance of consultation and cooperation with indigenous people in planning and implementing the programme of activities for the Decade. Subsequent resolutions of the General Assembly, the Commission on Human Rights and the Subcommission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights have recommended additional activities, under the aegis of the Decade programme to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights as well as to other United Nations organizations and specialized agencies. The present report reviews the extent to which it has been possible to realize these activities.

II. Overview

6. The information received or otherwise available from several United Nations system organizations attests to an evolution over the last five years in the development of policy guidelines, programme activities, consultation mechanisms, specific funding and staff resources being dedicated to indigenous peoples issues. A number of organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), state that they have launched initiatives or decided to review their programmes and policies relating to indigenous peoples as a result of the Decade. Some United Nations system organizations have provided information about their activities but have indicated that they are also

managing many projects on indigenous peoples at the national level.

7. Within the United Nations as a whole, the issue of indigenous people is at different stages of evolution. ILO first began to seek to protect indigenous rights in the 1920s, elaborated a convention specifically on indigenous and tribal populations in 1957, and has been responsible since 1989 for the only two international instruments exclusively on indigenous peoples. The Office of the High Commissioner dates its involvement in the question to the inception of a special study on discrimination against indigenous populations in 1970, and its formal contacts with indigenous peoples to the establishment of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982. The World Bank adopted its first policy guidelines on indigenous peoples in 1982. For these organizations, the Decade offers an opportunity to renew, review and strengthen their ongoing activities. In some other organizations whose mandates were felt to include indigenous peoples only as part of the vulnerable groups targeted by their activities, the Decade has stimulated an internal review and a recognition of the cultural specificity and special needs of indigenous communities. This is the case of the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), the Asian Development Bank (AsDB) and UNDP, for example. Since a number of United Nations organizations are now actively developing specific programmes of action, it may be stated that the General Assembly's objective is being met by a growing number of United Nations organizations and agencies. It may also be noted, however, that there is virtually no United Nations activity which does not affect indigenous people in some way or another and in which indigenous people do not have a legitimate interest.

8. In reviewing the information provided by United Nations organizations concerning their own internal guidelines for policy and programmes, it may be observed that ILO Convention No. 169 and the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, even though this latter document is not yet adopted by the General Assembly, often serve as a guide for United Nations agencies when they are considering issues relating to definition, consultation and community participation, indigenous political and social institutions or development priorities. Other agencies have stated that, although they undertake a number of activities benefiting indigenous communities they do not have a policy directive. This is the case for the World Food Programme (WFP), for example. No universal standards on indigenous peoples guide the United Nations as a whole and, in practice, United Nations organizations are either not adopting any particular guidelines or else are developing guidelines on the basis of different procedures, including in-house and external consultations and the integration of elements of ILO Convention No. 169, the draft declaration or some other instrument.

9. Several United Nations organizations have specific programmes and projects that have been undertaken or are being implemented during the Decade. Other United Nations agencies noted that, although they had no specific programmes for indigenous people, their communities could benefit from activities targeting vulnerable groups. All of the principal United Nations organizations and specialized agencies are now undertaking or are planning specific activities on indigenous peoples.

10. An increasing number of United Nations organizations, including WIPO, WHO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNDP and the World Bank, are organizing consultations with indigenous peoples to help them as they develop internal guidelines on indigenous issues and outline overall strategy. A number of United Nations organizations indicate that indigenous people are consulted in projects at the national level. In some instances, this may also mean that indigenous people are actively involved in all stages of a project. The ILO Interregional Programme to Support Self-reliance of Indigenous and Tribal Communities through cooperatives and other Self-help Organizations, for example, aims to help indigenous communities design and implement their own development plans and initiatives. As far as can be ascertained, these consultations have greatly enhanced the input by indigenous people into the programme planning of United Nations organizations. Indeed, in the case of certain United Nations organizations, whose portals had hardly been crossed by indigenous people prior to the Decade, the consultations may even have precipitated a small and welcome revolution in their traditional position of reticence in their dealings with NGOs.

11. Implicit in the theme of the Decade, "Indigenous people: partnership in action", and in the proposal to create a permanent forum is the notion that indigenous people and organizations should have recognized rights of participation in the United Nations decision-making bodies and have a formal or institutional role in international policy-formulation and policy-making in areas affecting their lives. The permanent forum proposal, under discussions in a working group of the Commission on Human Rights, may eventually serve, *inter alia*, as the principal advisory body on indigenous matters for the United Nations system as a whole and consideration is now being given as to how indigenous people may be made members of that body. Until such time as the permanent forum becomes a reality,

indigenous people will continue to participate in the distinct United Nations organizations on quite different bases. Consultations with indigenous people are often on an ad hoc basis and the recommendations arising from such consultations do not necessarily have any institutional recognition. Very few parts of the United Nations system have established formal channels for the participation of indigenous people in their activities. Perhaps the only two exceptions are the human rights programme and the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which has recently established a working group on article 8 (j) of the Convention.

12. The programme of activities for the International Decade, contained in the annex to resolution 50/157, set forth objectives and a list of activities to be undertaken by the major actors. As far as the objectives are concerned, information has been provided about the development activities being undertaken by the United Nations system (para. A.2), the implementation of the high-level conferences and the progress towards establishing a permanent forum for indigenous people (para. A.5) and standard-setting, in particular the situation regarding the draft declaration on the rights of indigenous people (para. A.6). Some information has been given in relation to the empowerment and participation of indigenous people within the United Nations system (para. A.4). One major objective of the Decade is the education of non-indigenous societies about the situations, cultures, languages, rights and aspirations of indigenous people (para A.3). The Department of Public Information has produced a poster and some public information materials and the Non-Governmental Liaison Service has published a roundup on indigenous issues for distribution through its NGO network. However, the United Nations system has not to date undertaken a global public awareness programme.

13. The formal observance of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People on 9 August, has become a well-attended and effective event in both Geneva and New York. In New York the focus has been mainly on providing a forum for the United Nations organizations to meet with indigenous representatives to exchange information on activities; in Geneva indigenous people themselves celebrate their own cultures through a morning event of dance, song, story and music that now attracts good press coverage, not only of the event itself but of the concerns and aspirations of indigenous people. Official observances of the Decade at high-level conferences have not been realized nor has the United Nations Population Fund produced a special series of stamps.

14. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights was requested to undertake 15 activities during the Decade. Some of the infrastructural proposals (the establishment of a focal unit, the secondment of staff, the creation of an advisory group) as well as those activities relating to the fellowship programme and human rights training are being realized. Preliminary work has been done to improve the flow of information about United Nations programmes to indigenous communities through the workshop on indigenous media and its follow-up. Furthermore, the Office of the High Commissioner has developed a database of indigenous organizations. Within the limits of its budget, and in line with recommendations from the legislative bodies of the United Nations, the Office has organized a number of meetings on relevant themes of concern.

15. Information has been provided about the focal points, programmes and funds of United Nations system organizations in relation to indigenous peoples as well as mechanisms for indigenous participation (paras. B.30, 31, 32 and 36). The Office of the High Commissioner, in collaboration with the organizations and agencies of the United Nations system, is finalizing the guide proposed by the General Assembly (para. B.33). Some United Nations organizations have referred to research activities they are undertaking (para. B.34). The Office of the High Commissioner and ILO have organized inter-agency consultations on a regular basis since the beginning of the Decade, and organizations such as UNDP, WIPO and WHO have held inter-agency consultations to exchange information on specific themes. As far as is known, no United Nations organization is preparing a database on national legislation on matters of relevance to indigenous people (para. B.39).

16. Two problems faced in implementing the Decade's activities are the limited human resources available and the lack of funding for the activities themselves. Only a quarter of the United Nations organizations for which information was available have a designated focal point or unit for indigenous people or for the Decade. Contributions to the Voluntary Fund for the International Decade, established by the General Assembly to fund activities of the Decade, totalled some US$ 1.1 million in the period from January 1995 to October 1999. Three countries provided more than 70 per cent of the contributions, and one of these, Denmark, 40 per cent. At the present time, insufficient funds are available to complete the programme approved by the Advisory Group and the High Commissioner for 1999 and no funds are available for the programme for 2000.

17. The proclamation of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous People has raised high expectations among indigenous people worldwide. It has set objectives

which are ambitious but realistic. The achievement of some of the goals of the Decade — the adoption of a declaration and the establishment of a permanent forum for indigenous people within the United Nations — are dependent upon the will of Member States and progress in the negotiations. The High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed her support for this process and stands ready to cooperate in any way which would advance the realization of these two important goals. With respect to the other objectives of the Decade and the fulfilment of the broader trust which indigenous peoples have in the United Nations system, it is necessary to renew the commitment of the international community to contributing to improvements in the lives of indigenous people. It is recommended that Governments consider holding a meeting during 2000, at which specific practical and realizable projects, in particular inter-agency activities, could be elaborated and endorsed. This would also be an opportunity for the international community, Governments and United Nations organizations to demonstrate their support for the world's indigenous people.